DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 912 PS 029 976

AUTHOR Daniel, Jerlean; Clarke, Theresa; Ouellette, Mark
TITLE Developing and Supporting Literacy-Rich Environments for Children. Issue Brief.
INSTITUTION National Governors' Association, Washington, DC. Center for Best Practices.
PUB DATE 2001-02-26
NOTE 9p.
AVAILABLE FROM NGA Center for Best Practices, Hall of States, 444 N. Capitol Street, Washington, DC 20001-1512. Tel: 202-624-5300. For full text: http://www.nga.org.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; Beginning Writing; Early Childhood Education; Environmental Influences; *Literacy; Program Descriptions; *State Action; State Programs; Young Children

ABSTRACT

Asserting that early reading success is a strong predictor of academic success in later grades and that the early childhood years (birth through age 8) are critical for literacy development, this issue brief explores actions states can take to develop and support literacy-rich environments for children. Following an introductory summary, the brief highlights the current problem of lack of literacy development in some children and describes what is present in a literacy-rich environment. The brief then discusses actions for state policy makers: (1) raise public awareness; (2) provide resources and information; (3) improve professional development of teachers; and (4) increase access to literacy-rich environments. The brief also describes efforts to support literacy-rich environments in Connecticut, Delaware, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Wisconsin. (EV)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 459 912

Developing and Supporting Literacy-Rich Environments for Children. Issue Brief.

Jerlean Daniel, Theresa Clarke, and Mark Ouellette

February 2001

National Governors Association
Center for Best Practices

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

❑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE,
AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC
COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY,
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Y. Bond

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

PS 029 976

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Ps

Issue Brief

NGA Center for BEST PRACTICES

Education Policy Studies Division
Contact: Theresa Clarke, 202/624-5387 or tclarke@nga.org
February 26, 2001

Developing and Supporting Literacy-Rich Environments for Children*

Summary

Early reading success is a strong predictor of academic success in later grades, and the early childhood years (birth through age eight) are critical ones for literacy development. After grade three, demands on the student change from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," as reading becomes a fundamental means to acquire new knowledge about all subjects.

According to current research, literacy development begins long before children begin formal instruction in elementary school.[1] It proceeds along a continuum, with children acquiring literacy skills in a variety of ways and at different ages. Early behaviors such as "reading" from pictures and "writing" scribbles are an important part of children's literacy development. Social interactions with caring adults and exposure to literacy materials (e.g., storybooks) nourish literacy development. "Literacy-rich environments" offer daily, extended conversations with adults about interesting topics.

Policymakers that want to develop and support literacy-rich environments in their states can take these actions.

- **Raise public awareness**. Policymakers should make parents and caregivers aware of the importance of their being a child's first teacher. A literacy campaign can bring adults and children together to read and discuss books daily.
- **Provide resources and information**. States may want to provide free materials that explain cognitive research to help parents and caregivers understand how to enhance a child's vocabulary and establish a literacy-rich environment.
- **Improve professional development**. High-quality reading instruction in child care settings, preschool, and the primary grades requires teachers who are well prepared and trained in teaching reading.

PS 029976

- **Increase access to literacy–rich environments**. Policymakers can increase the number of spaces in approved child care programs for low-income families and designate funding streams to support these programs.

What Is the Problem?

Of every three kindergartners, one comes to school unprepared to learn. Moreover, parents routinely read to only 50 percent of infants and toddlers. For children to be successful in school, they must have early experiences with language. The latest research in literacy development shows that a child's experiences with oral language development and literacy, as early as the first months of life, begin a foundation for later reading success.

Children need three skills to become good readers.[2] Good readers have an understanding of how the alphabet works, an awareness that reading is about meaning, and sufficient fluency in reading. Some children obtain these three skills quickly. Other children need to be taught about the relationship among letters, that letters represent small sounds in words, and about the relationship of specific letters to specific sounds. Often, parents, caregivers, and teachers need to help children understand that the reason they read is to uncover a message. The most effective way to convey this is to provide children with a literacy-rich environment.

What Is a Literacy-Rich Environment?

In a literacy-rich environment, parents, teachers, and caregivers ensure that children engage in one-on-one conversations about everyday life—activities, people, or events the *children* find interesting. Literacy-rich environments include daily reading, extended discourse (talking or writing), experimentation with reading materials, book talk (discussion of characters, action, and plot), and dramatic play. In this environment, children have many opportunities to see how printed words are used for many purposes. They become familiar with print and language, and these are both integrated into everyday activities.

Literacy-rich environments have the following characteristics.[3]

- Children are surrounded by oral language, books, and print. Various reading and writing materials are available throughout the home for children and adults.
- Adults share their ideas and feelings with children and encourage them to express themselves.
- Children see adults reading for pleasure and for practical and specific purposes, such as paying bills or learning about the news.
- Families consider children's emergent reading and writing to be real, valuable experiences. They accept children's efforts without correcting mistakes or providing direct instruction.

- Families talk with children about the print they see around them and explain how it provides information (e.g., signs on buses and streets, labels on food packages, and coupons).
- Teachers provide the experience of group learning and design their classrooms to encourage reading and writing.

In literacy-rich environments, children learn about the world through talking and reading, refining these skills along the way. Children's knowledge of language is built on their own investigative skills applied to interesting topics, coupled with the finely honed skills of a talented teacher and a well thought out curriculum. Young children in the United States spend their days in a variety of places—homes, child care centers, preschools, and elementary schools. Each of these places should be a literacy-rich environment, so parents, child care providers, and teachers must all understand how to provide such environments for children.

What Can Policymakers Do to Develop and Support Literacy-Rich Environments?

Instruction in the early primary grades (grades one through three) is most effective when children arrive at school motivated to learn how to read.[1] Children who arrive at school with the necessary linguistic, cognitive, and early literacy skills are better able to succeed in reading. State policymakers can support literacy readiness by helping parents and caregivers improve the quality of literacy environments before children enter school and in the crucial first years of school. Policymakers can develop and support literacy-rich environments through these actions.

Raise public awareness. Policymakers can help parents and caregivers provide literacy-rich environments by increasing their awareness of the importance of their being a child's first teacher. A statewide literacy campaign is one strategy to increase awareness and provide information. A campaign can bring adults and children together in families, schools, and communities to read and discuss books daily. Reading aloud to children exposes them to vocabulary and concepts beyond their reading capacity, but not beyond their understanding with the help of context clues and the knowledge of more advanced readers.[4] Early collaborative involvement of a state's nonprofit literacy programs, early childhood teachers, book vendors, and book clubs can offer a wealth of creative ideas and implementation strategies. In **Maine** First Lady Mary Herman collaborated with the state commissioner of education to release a new report to spell out six key elements in early childhood literacy education.[5]

Provide resources and information. Policymakers can also support parents and caregivers in their important roles as first teachers by providing free books and other materials that explain current cognitive research, such as *Open Young Minds: Read to Children*, a brochure published by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.[6] These materials should discuss literacy-promoting and vocabulary-enhancing techniques parents, teachers, and caregivers can use. Some of these activities include discussing a child's drawings, reading books on topics in which a child has expressed an interest, and describing to children the difference between

newspaper text and poetry. Providing useful literacy resources to parents and caregivers is a powerful tool to help them create literacy-rich environments for children.

Improve professional development. State policymakers can help improve the quality of teaching by improving professional development. Optimal environments and excellent instruction in child care settings, preschool, and the primary grades require teachers who are well prepared and highly knowledgeable in teaching reading. Governors and other state policymakers can also develop policies to ensure the appropriate licensing of providers and teachers. States require elementary school teachers to be licensed to teach, but most states do not require licenses to teach in child care or preschool settings. Students of teachers who hold teaching certificates in their fields—early childhood education or elementary education in this case—perform better academically than students whose teachers are not certified. High-quality child care programs require stricter licensing requirements for staff and smaller staff-child ratios. Such high-quality programs result in enhanced language outcomes for children, especially those from low-income homes.

Increase access to literacy-rich environments. State policymakers can also promote literacy-rich environments for children by increasing access to quality early education. Support for early care and education in Early Head Start programs, Head Start programs, preschool programs, child care centers, and schools can come from a variety of federal, state, and local funding sources, including federal education funds, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Child Care Block Grant monies, child care funds, state general education funds, and local dollars. States can increase the number of spaces in approved child care programs and help communities provide literacy-rich environments in child care and education settings by designating innovative funding streams to develop and sustain them.

What Are Some State Strategies for Supporting Literacy-Rich Environments?

Connecticut's 1999 Act Concerning School Readiness and Child Day Care allows its department of education to administer grants to high-need school districts and programs to provide school readiness services, including preliteracy and literacy activities, to three-, four-, and five-year-olds. In addition, this legislation called on the nonprofit organization, Connecticut Charts-A-Course, to implement the state's career development plan for early education and school-age care providers. Charts-A-Course provides quality training and career support to professionals teaching young children. The legislation also requires each local and regional board of education to develop and implement a three-year plan to improve the reading skills of students in kindergarten through grade three. In-service training programs must provide information on teaching language arts, reading, and reading readiness to teachers of students in kindergarten through grade three. Finally, the legislation requires that continuing education completed by early childhood through grade three teachers include at least 15 hours of training in the teaching of reading and reading readiness and the assessment of reading performance.

Delaware First Lady Martha S. Carper launched the Delaware Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) initiative in 1998 to stimulate family literacy by bringing literacy services and free books to young children and their families. The preschool program provides reading readiness activities for the home, read-aloud strategies for parents and caregivers, and children's books to take home.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Mrs. Carper also co-chaired the Delaware Commission for Reading Success, which produced a comprehensive report for addressing the state's literacy needs. Two other state–supported early childhood programs are the Early Childhood Assistance Program and the Parents as Teachers program for first–born children at-risk for later learning challenges.

With strong involvement from First Lady Mary Herman, **Maine** is pursuing a wide range of creative strategies and partnerships focused on early and family literacy, building on a long history of success on standardized tests of early literacy performance. A new report from the Maine Department of Education on early literacy education, *A Solid Foundation*, together with the Department's newly established Center of Inquiry on Early Literacy, is catalyzing conversations and professional development for teachers and parents, as well as follow-up research. Maine is leveraging available federal grants Including Title 1 and a Reading Excellence Act grant for ongoing professional development in early literacy and establishment of family literacy programs. Maine is also using creative private–sector partnerships to reach young children and parents with books and support in early reading. The Read With Me program, sponsored by the Verizon Foundation, provides books and reading support materials to nearly all kindergarten students and their families across Maine when they enter school in September; the Raising Readers program supported by Maine's Libra Foundation will distribute a dozen books to each child born in Maine, based on a "prescription to read" approach that gives each newborn two books at birth with additional books at each pediatric checkup through age five.

Michigan Governor John Engler first outlined READY (Read, Educate, and Develop Youth), a parent information effort on the importance of reading and early learning, in his 1998 state-of-the-state address. READY seeks to strengthen parent involvement in the early childhood years so children develop the language and prereading skills they need to enter school ready to read and succeed. A READY kit containing written, audio, and visual information and materials was developed, and the Governor formally unveiled the kit in August 1998. Three levels of READY kits in Spanish and English have been created for parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Since inception in 1998, more than 300,000 READY kits have been distributed to parents through a network of READY county coordinators comprised of early childhood education programs, human service coordinating bodies, hospitals, agricultural extension offices, and intermediate school districts. Funding has been appropriated to permit the distribution of an additional 350,000 READY kits in 2000.

Missouri's Parents as Teachers (PAT) program is a home-school-community partnership supporting parents in their role as first teachers. The Early Childhood Development Act that established PAT provides funds to public school districts to implement developmental screenings and parent education services. Children are screened in the areas of language, motor, health and physical development, and sensory functioning. Parent education services are delivered through small group meetings with parents of similarly aged children and personalized private visits. PAT programs collaborate with federal and state agencies and programs, including Head Start, Even Start, Title I, First Steps, Missouri Caring Communities, county health departments, and the Missouri Division of Family Services.

North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt Jr. launched Smart Start, an early childhood initiative, in 1993 to address the concern that many children arrive at school unprepared for school success.

Smart Start uses early childhood education to enhance the literacy skills of young children before they enter kindergarten. The family literacy programs of Smart Start help family members learn to read and encourage them to read to their young children. Smart Start's success is based on local control, community planning and collaboration, and a comprehensive approach to reach all children. In its 1999–2000 budget, the legislature funded Smart Start at $220 million. State statute requires a 10-percent match from the private sector each year, and the initiative has garnered more than $50 million in private funds and contributions since it began.

Ohio's Ready to Learn initiative seeks to help parents and home caregivers expose children to an expanded set of learning opportunities by producing public service anouncements and conducting workshops for adults who care for children in their homes. One of the four workshops, "Help Me Learn," uses brain development research to teach parents and caregivers about how children learn. The U.S. Department of Education funds Ready to Learn with an annual allocation of $7 million. Ohio added $1.3 million from the Child Care and Development Fund to produce the public service announcements and to design and implement the workshops.

South Carolina's Office of Family Independence in the department of social services and the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) initiated a pilot project in 1996 to combine Head Start activities with family literacy and employment services for parents. The project's goal was to develop a more comprehensive approach to assisting welfare families by promoting parent and child literacy. In fiscal 1998–99, South Carolina used funding from three sources to pilot this initiative. The state allocated $36,000 in TANF block grant funds to provide parents with employment and life-skills training at Head Start centers ($6,000 per site); $90,000 from the U.S. Department of Education's Rural Initiative Grant ($15,000 per site); and $300,000 over three years from the federal Head Start Bureau to the NCFL for training and technical assistance.

In his 1999-2001 biennial budget, **Wisconsin** Governor Tommy G. Thompson earmarked $10.5 million form the federal Child Care Development Fund to create 18 innovative, state-of-the-art Early Childhood Excellence Centers for low-income children age birth to five. Each center provides innovative, high–quality programs that enhance children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and language development. These centers also provide parent education services and deliver training to child care providers. All programs provide an environment that is rich in visual, auditory, tactile, and other sensory experiences that are guided by research on the development of the brain and are provided through positive interactions with consistent caregivers. These centers strive to ensure that children under the age of five, primarily from low-income families, reach their full potential.

What Can States Do?

Governors and other state leaders are aware that children's language skills are fundamental to success in school and in everyday life. In designing policies to promote literacy, policymakers may want to consider raising public awareness, providing information and resources, improving professional development, and increasing access to high-quality care and education.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Policymakers understand that the earlier children are exposed to books the better. The next step is to ensure adult constituents have the ability and opportunity to develop and sustain literacy-rich environments at home and in the schools.

Endnotes

[1] North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, *Critical Issue: Addressing the Literacy Needs of Emergent and Early Readers* (Oak Brook, Ill.: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999), at <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/cntareas/reading/li100.htm>.

[2] Pediatric Services, "Catherine Snow on Helping Your Child Develop Language," at <http://www.pediatricservices.com/answers/009-language.htm>.

[3] Kidsource, "Language and Literacy Environments in Preschools," at <http://www.kidsource.com/education/lang.lit.preschool.html>.

[4] Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1995).

[5] "Report Lists Best Methods to Teach Young Reader," *Bangor Daily News*, 22 November 2000.

[6] This brochure was written by Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and released in August 1999. It is available at <http://www.nga.org/Education/read.pdf>.

*This *Issue Brief* was written by Jerlean Daniel of the University of Pittsburgh and Theresa Clarke and Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.